What Our Wars Have Done for Verse

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ONE of the most astonishing things about the world war is that it inspired so little poetry—none at all, indeed, if by poetry one means lofty and impassioned utterance stirring the hearts of men and ringing down the ages. This is the more remarkable because there certainly seems to be no dearth of poets if one may believe the reviews and the publishers' advertisements, especially of young poets whose blood, one would suppose, would be fired by martial deeds and by the ideals of liberty for which the war was fought.

Of such poetry as was written England must be credited with the lion's share. American lyrics were either ingloriously mute or tinkled uncertainly and faintly. Only one American produced anything truly touched with the divine afflatus—and he was a resident of Paris. Alan Seeger's two glowing poems stand almost alone as America's poetic contribution to the world conflict. Their nearest competitor is George Edward Woodberry's "Sonnets Written in the Fall of 1914."

On the English side the record is far better, though one may doubt whether anything outside of the sonnet sequence written by Rupert Brooke was really a work of genius. There were, however, a number of admirable poems—Masefield's "August, 1914," Grenfell's "Into Battle," McCrae's "In Flanders Fields," Winifred Letts's "The Spires of Oxford," a few verses by Ledwidge and Sassoon—and almost all of England's poets did the best that was in them; but even here the record is surprisingly poor. As one looks through the many collections of verse motivated by the war the principal impression is of drab mediocrity. If any poems stand out it is rather because of the Sahara surrounding them than because of any striking eminence of their own.

However, the concern here is not with English but with American verse, and the more one reflects upon it the more one is amazed at its paucity. Why was it that the band of bards who were supposed to be carrying on a poetic renaissance in our midst, and whose genius had been so often mutually acclaimed, wrote either nothing at all or the thinnest stuff of their careers? Why was it that not one of them could dip into his heart and bring forth a sincere and stirring song to fire the hearts of his countrymen? Above all, why was it that, in spite of schools of poetry and innumerable lectures upon poetry and endless talk about poetry and blatant boasting about our new interest in and understanding of poetry, and even perhaps a considerable private reading of poetry—why was it that not one of the four million men in the ranks of the American army produced a poem?

Heaven knows it was not because they didn't try! Week after week the *Stars and Stripes*, the official newspaper of the A. E. F., published a column or two of verse contributed by the men in France. There were something like two millions of these men, and one would suppose that there must certainly have been two or three poets among them; but out of the hundreds of published contributions and the thousands of unpublished ones just one poem, Joyce Kilmer's "Rouge Bouquet," would ever be reprinted on its merits. The *Stars and Stripes* was a very good newspaper, but its poetry column was lamentable.

Somebody has said that the Union army won the civil war by its marching songs—"John Brown's Body," "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," "The Battle Cry of Freedom," and so on—doggerel for the most part, composed or at least rearranged by the men in the ranks as they slogged along, but wonderfully inspiring to drooping spirits and weary feet. The only song which the world war inspired was Mr. Cohan's tawdry jingle "Over There," and the present writer does not remember ever having heard it sung spontaneously by American soldiers. Occasionally a few were induced to sing it by some misguided Y. M. C. A. worker, and the military bands played it sometimes—on one unforgettable occasion when the composite regiment from the Army of Occupation marched like one man past the reviewing stand at the dedication of the Pershing Stadium—but "Over There" was designed for the music hall, not for the march—for the pony ballet, not for the doughboy.

Ours was not indeed a singing army—perhaps because it had no good songs, or perhaps because modern warfare does not encourage singing. By comparison the civil war, with its bivouacs and raids and campfires and foraging parties, was a sort of picnic. That, of course, may be a partial explanation of our poets' insufficiency—there is very little in modern warfare for the poet to get hold of; it has lost the personality, the picturesqueness of the old days. There are no more cavalry charges or waving banners or intrepid drummer boys. And yet, in another way, it should be more inspiring than it has ever been, for it is more grandiose, with its combats in the air and under the sea, its far flung battles involving millions of men, its conflict of nation against nation. Perhaps, some day, instead of a song, we shall have an epic!

II.

Meanwhile, one cannot fail to be impressed by this growing insensitiveness to patriotic stimulus or at least by the inability to give it adequate poetic expression. It was not always so. Some of the most stirring poems in American literature, including two of our great national anthems, were not only directly inspired by war but were uniquely inspired. Under the stress of patriotic emotion, some heart, ordinarily prosaic, would for the first and last time burst into imperishable song or some craftsman of verse, usually nothing more than a good journeyman, would, once and only once, flower into a poet.

Everybody knows the story of the undistinguished young Baltimore lawyer who was marooned one September night in 1814 on a little cartel boat, the Minden, in the midst of the British fleet which was bombarding Fort McHenry, with the result a poem called "The Defence of Fort M'Henry," printed as a broadside, was in the hands of the people of Baltimore the next evening and was soon rechristened "The Star Spangled Banner." It is pompous and hob nailed but it is also sincere and authentic and no American, reading it with a knowledge of the circumstances which produced it, can fail to feel a stirring of the heart. In spite of the stupid old air to which it is harnessed it has easily held its own, in the face of a century of competition, as the great American anthem.

And every one knows the story of the middle aged Bostonienne who, fifty years later, caught in the flurry of a serio comic Confederate raid near Washington, heard the Union troops singing "John Brown's Body," went to bed with that air running through her head and arose in the gray dawn of the following morning to write six new stanzas to it, hastily scrawled upon the first sheet of paper that came to hand—stanzas which James T. Fields, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, christened "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and printed on the first page of the issue of February, 1862.

That is, he printed five of the stanzas. Mrs. Howe in her reminiscences does not state who decided that the final stanza should be dropped, but one suspects that Mr. Fields, when he read the poem, perceived that the inspiration ended with the fifth one. Here is the sixth:

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave;
He is wisdom to the mighty, he is succor to the brave;
So the world shall be his footstool and the soul of Time his slave.
Our God is marching on!

Years afterward, when the poem had become famous (it was scarcely noticed at first), a facsimile of the manuscript was issued, giving all six stanzas, and got to England. In the spring and summer of 1917, when the English were testifying with amusing fervor to their appreciation of American assistance, the "Battle Hymn" was frequently sung at church services and patriotic rallies, and any Americans who happened to be in the audience were bewildered by the inclusion of a stanza which they had never heard before and whose authenticity many of them doubted.

It has been very often objected that neither "The Star-Spangled Banner" nor the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is really national; that they are both occasional, one glorifying the defense of Baltimore, the other the sacred character of the fight against slavery, but none of the many additional stanzas which have been written by various people in the attempt to bringg them up to date has caught the popular fancy. During the civil war Oliver Wendell Holmes tried his hand at it, with this result:

When our land is illumined with Liberty's smile,
If a foe from within strike a blow at her glory,
Down, down with the traitor who dares to defile
The flag of her stars and the page of her story!
By the millions unchained
Who their birthright have gained
We will keep her bright blazon forever unstained;
And the Star-Spangled banner in triumph shall wave
While the land of the free is the home of the brave.

And during the world war Dr. Henry van Dyke wrote this stanza:

Thank God, we can see, in the glory of morn,
The invincible flag that our fathers defended;
And our hearts can repeat what the heroes have sworn,
That war shall not end till the war-lust is ended.
Then the bloodthirsty sword
Shall no longer be lord
Of the nations oppressed by the conqueror's horde.
But the banners of freedom shall peacefully wave
O'er the world of the free and the lands of the brave.

Neither of which could, by any possibility be called thrilling. Of the proposed additions to the "Battle Hymn" it will suffice to quote one, also from the pen of Dr. van Dyke and printed in the New York *Times* of March 16, 1918:

We have heard the cry of anguish from the victims of the Hun,
And we know our country's peril if the war-lord's will is done—
We will fight for world-wide freedom till the victory is won,
For God is marching on.

This is interesting principally because of the spirited remonstrance it evoked from Mrs. Howe's daughter, Mrs. Florence Howe Hall, and whether because of this or for some other reason, it is not included in Dr. van Dyke's collected poems. Modernizing the classics has always been parlous work!

III.

There is a legend that the tune with which "The Star Spangled Banner" has always been associated was hit upon by an actor named Ferdinand Duran, who was serving as a soldier in Baltimore at the time, and who really was, perhaps, the first man to sing it in public. But it is far more reasonable to suppose that Key himself had the air in mind when he wrote the poem, otherwise he would scarcely have selected a stanza form so unusual and involved, or written lines which fit the old air far more smoothly than those for which it was composed.

To be sure, the original manuscript of Key's poem bears neither title nor indi-

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MR. STEVENSON'S article on "What Our Wars Have Done for Verse" is in a measure an introductory article to a series that is being done by him for the book section of The New York Herald on "Famous One-Poem Men." From time to time there appears a poem that is not only destined long to outlive its author but that, from the moment of its appearance, is quoted from one end of the land to the other, while the author remains in comparative obscurity. The stories of these poems will be told in subsequent numbers of the section. In early issues will be discussed "Hoch der Kaiser," J. I. C. Clarke's "The Fighting Race" and H. J. L. McCreery's "There Is No Death."